

Meeting at Oxford House, 20 October 2014



Our speaker on this occasion was **Ilwad Elman** who was one of the subjects of the article, on page 52 of Issue 55, about **‘Through the Fire: A Documentary about three Heroic Somali Women’**. Ilwad is, of course, one of those heroic women, the others being Edna Adan Ismail and Dr. Hawa Abdi. The Meeting began with a screening of the film itself and was followed by questions and discussion. The result was, surely, one of our most successful meetings, ever, with a capacity audience in the Theatre at Oxford House.

The Meeting was a constituent of the **Somali Week Festival 2014**, the annual event presented by Kayd Somali Arts and Culture in collaboration with the Redsea Cultural Foundation and Partners. Particular thanks are due to **Ayan Mahamoud** of Kayd, who is also a Council Member of the Anglo-Somali Society, for making it possible for us to be able to offer Ilwad as our speaker. We were also delighted to welcome the **producer of the film, Sarah Winfield**, and we greatly appreciated her going to considerable lengths to ensure that practical arrangements for the screening were in place. Sarah introduced Ilwad to the audience and, in response to questions, was able to give some background to the film, particularly its rationale and the circumstances which led to the choice of its three subjects.

It emerged that Ilwad first came to Sarah’s attention as a result of Ilwad’s talk in the now widely-known TED series. If at all possible the reader should Google ‘TED Ilwan’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBqdyn_V7VE) to witness her fluent and inspirational virtuosity in her slightly younger days. Her flawless presentation speaks of the influences and characters of her father and mother. Her father, Elman Ali Ahmed, was educated in Italy and returned to Mogadishu in 1982 where he worked tirelessly and fearlessly on behalf of street children and orphans and where, until he was assassinated, his catchphrase was, ‘Drop the gun, pick up the pen’. After her return to Mogadishu from Canada in 2007, Ilwad’s mother, Fartuun Adan, created the country’s first rape crisis centre.

At our Meeting the Society’s **Chair, Dr. Eleni Palazidou**, invited questions which proved to be wide-ranging and challenging. Ilwad’s responses were articulate, unhesitating, and incisive. Her command of the audience had a sharp

edge. As might have been expected she was besieged by individual questions after the formal session closed. These she handled with great charm.

Eleni also took the opportunity to announce that the Society's Council had that day decided to **launch an Appeal** for Ilwad's organisation in Mogadishu, the **Elman Peace and Human Rights Centre**. This was greeted with instant approval by the audience.

APPEAL

ELMAN PEACE AND HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE, MOGADISHU

The Centre is a vocational training facility that provides rehabilitation programmes for former child soldiers, and is managed by Ilwad Elman and her mother, Fartuun Adan. It continues the work of Elman Ali Ahmed, Ilwad's father, who ran community initiatives that cared for orphans, and instilled a spirit of reconciliation through football and other team activities, before he was assassinated on a busy Mogadishu street when his daughter was 7 years old.

Readers are urged to make a donation to support this work by sending a cheque, payable to the Anglo-Somali Society and marked 'Elman Appeal' on the reverse side, to the Society's Treasurer:

Katherine Hotchkiss, Wayside, Watergate Lane, St. Mabyn, Bodmin, PL30 3BJ

A receipt will be sent if specifically requested.

Ilwad's responses to the questions from the audience covered many aspects of her experiences. For example, she spoke of her culture shock on her return to Mogadishu from Canada where she had become the all-Canadian girl. Her Somali was not good, so she had to set to and learn it. Though Mogadishu has a reputation as one of the most dangerous cities in the world as a place for women to live Ilwad took the positive view that, despite the tragic amount of sexual violence being perpetrated, women were becoming more and more integrated into decision-making roles.

When former child soldiers join the Elman Centre they are firstly taken into residential care for 3 months and given psychological and social support. Their drawings and paintings reveal their view of life and rarely fail to portray military weapons in one context or another. One of the main problems at this stage is that the children do not trust one another nor adults in the outside world. At what point do they stop being 'soldiers'? To *al-Shabaab* they are defectors; yet, at the same time, to the Somalia Government forces they are the enemy. At what point can they begin to lead fresh lives?

Residential care is followed by 10 months of learning vocational skills which are linked as closely as possible with employment opportunities and encouragement to set up private businesses. Research over 5 years, carried out on beneficiaries of the Elman Centre, shows most importantly that children can become children again. The reasons for former child soldiers being attracted to the Centre in the first place were mainly the promise of sustenance and the hope of eventually gaining an honest livelihood.

Ilwad is looking to the future with ambition and confidence. The ultimate foci are always human rights and peace building. Having gained the trust and support of the Somalia Government the Centre's premises are secure for the foreseeable future. There are plans to spread outside Mogadishu to other parts of Somalia. In particular it is seen as vitally important to move rapidly into areas as soon as they are liberated from *al-Shabaab* so that the child soldiers can be protected. Ilwad does not see herself as indispensable. She believes that those who work for the Centre are imbued with virtue and driven to carry on, and succeed. Caring people are motivated by the very name of her father.

Do the 'private' institutions created by the three 'heroic women' undermine national institution-building? Is there a danger of glorifying individuals? No, not at all. Their 'heroism' is necessary when government is too weak to provide. Private initiative works *with* government.

What can a young woman from the diaspora do to help? She does not have to start from scratch and found an organisation. She can join an existing organisation. The Elman Centre, for example, has volunteer and internship schemes. Any number of skills are invaluable, not least those relating to mental health.

Not only were Ilwad's responses applauded, but the members of the audience were so focused and so finely tuned that they applauded their questions as well. Wonderful.